



The Role of Open Universities in Expanding Access to Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the distribution of open universities worldwide and assesses the advantages and disadvantages of open online and distance education. Asia has more open universities and has heavily invested in distance education. The continent's vast size and large population have posed significant challenges to education in Asia, but these challenges have been addressed mainly through open and distance e-learning. In Africa, the African Council for Distance Education (ACDE) coordinates the activities of all distance and online education institutions, ensuring quality delivery through its quality assurance toolkit, which supports self-assessment and guides regulatory bodies. The paper also discusses the framework developed by the Commonwealth of Learning for measuring openness, which each open online university can use to evaluate its own degree of openness. Recommendations are provided on how to enhance openness. Finally, the paper discusses success rates in open learning and offers suggestions on how to improve completion rates in open and online education. The learner's environment and access to technology are vital for the successful completion of studies in ODeL. The availability of affordable technologies, including cheaper internet, is crucial for improving the success rates of open and distance learning, as well as online learners.

Keywords: ACDE, Education, Higher Education, ODeL, Tanzania



Introduction

The conceptual structure of an “Open” University was described at the inauguration of the Open University of the United Kingdom (OU-UK) (Crowther, 1969) as a university which is:

- (i) Open to People: No formal academic qualifications are required for admission and registration.
- (ii) Open to Places: the University is always open to anyone from anywhere.
- (iii) Open to Methods: Every new form of human communication can be examined to see how it can be used to raise and broaden the level of human understanding;
- (iv) Open to Ideas: The limits, not only of explorable space, but of human understanding, are infinitely wider than we have made to believe.

Open Universities are higher education institutions that provide flexible and accessible learning opportunities, mainly through distance education using various media and delivery methods. These universities have open admission policies with minimal restrictions and are committed to lifelong learning, accommodating students of all ages. It is through open universities that education is often said to have been ‘democratised’.

The European Commission's definition of open education is: "a way of carrying out education, often using digital technologies. It aims to widen access and participation for everyone by removing barriers and making learning accessible, abundant, and customisable for all."

(Source:

<http://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC101436/jrc101436.pdf> found on 18th March, 2024).

Open education is a modification of distance education designed to be more friendly and flexible for adult learners. According to Mishra (2023), the word ‘openness’ in education considers ten key elements: (i) Entry requirements, (ii) Study location, (iii) Time of learning, (iv) Curricular flexibility, (v) Pedagogical approach, (vi) Technology use,

(vii) Learning resources, (viii) Assessment approach, (ix) Recognition of credentials, and (x) Cost of education.

Open education encompasses educational practices and resources that are freely available to the public. The idea behind it is to make education more accessible, affordable, and inclusive. Open education includes various elements such as open educational resources (OER), open access, open courses, and open pedagogy. According to Wikipedia, open education is a collective term used to describe institutional practices and programme initiatives that expand access to learning and training traditionally provided through formal education systems.

(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_education#cite_note-1 found on 18/3/2024).

Distance education, also known as distance learning, involves the education of students who may not always be physically present at school, or where the learner and teacher are separated in both time and space. Distance education is defined as instruction between a teacher and students when they are separated by physical distance, with communication achieved through one or more technological media. Developments in ICT have made it possible for learners to interact with lecturers so conveniently that the distance barrier is almost eliminated. The use of video conference applications allows students and teachers to see each other online, providing no additional advantage to the student who is on the same premises as the teacher. Modern technology has almost eradicated distance.

Online education is a flexible method of delivering instruction that includes any learning that occurs via the internet. Online learning provides educators with the chance to reach students who might not be able to attend a traditional classroom course and supports students who need to work at their own schedule and pace. This is asynchronous learning, where students and teachers do not need to be online simultaneously. The main challenges for online learners are low bandwidth in some rural areas, especially in developing countries, and the high cost of internet connectivity.

Open, distance, flexible, and online learning are not often found in their purest forms (Bates, 2015), as no teaching system is entirely open. Therefore, the degree of openness varies between institutions and countries, depending on the regulatory framework of higher education in each specific nation.

Global Distribution of Open Universities

Open universities are a recent phenomenon, beginning with the establishment of the Open University of the United Kingdom in the 1960s, and are best known for offering distance education.

The University of London is reported to have introduced the first distance learning degrees after receiving its External Programme charter from Queen Victoria in 1858. For many years, printed materials sent by post served as the primary link between teachers and students. It is reported (De Salvo, 2002) that between 1887 and 1931, nearly 40,000 students were admitted and sat University of London Examinations, with nearly a quarter earning bachelor's and master's degrees. In North America, Pitman (1987) documented that correspondence courses were already standard by 1892. The period from 1892 to 1910 saw a swift increase in the number of institutions and students participating in correspondence or distance education. In Australia, the University of Queensland is noted (White, 1982) to have established its Department of Correspondence Studies in 1911, making its programmes accessible to learners across Australia and the southern Pacific region.

UNISA was the first distance learning institution to be established on the African continent. During apartheid in South Africa, with segregation of black people, distance education was the only opportunity for black individuals to access quality higher education. Furthermore, it was not only in South Africa but also across the rest of sub-Saharan Africa where Unisa's distance learning programmes attracted students.

Open universities first gained popularity in British Commonwealth countries such as India, Canada, and Australia. However, soon African

countries also began establishing distance learning institutions and open universities. In other regions, distance learning has been established in China, Russia, and North America. The Asian continent leads with more than 47 open universities, compared to only 11 in Africa. The Open University of China (OUC) has the largest enrolment, with over 5 million students and more than 10 million graduates.

Table 1: Global Distribution of Open Universities

Continent	No of Open Universities	Percentage (%)
Africa	11	13.3
Asia	47	56.6
Europe	12	14.5
North America	10	12
South America	3	3.6
TOTAL	83	100

Source: Author

Advantages Of Distance and Online Open Education

Flexibility

One of the most notable advantages of online learning is the flexibility it provides to students, most of whom are busy with work and have little time to pursue their studies. Students can therefore set their own schedules for studying and even for taking examinations. This flexibility includes the ability to attend classes from any location and to fit classes into their busy work routines. At the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), we have taken this further by offering ON-DEMAND Examinations. Similarly, we provide ON-DEMAND GRADUATION, where we issue certificates and transcripts whenever a candidate completes all the requirements for the award of any course.

Convenience

Online education can be accessed from anywhere as long as the learner has a convenient internet connection. This enables students in remote areas to study without needing to visit their campuses. It also includes the ability for students to attend live lectures via video conference applications such as *Teams*, *Zoom*, and others. Students can communicate with their professors through email and social media apps for consultations. Even oral examinations are feasible for students in distant locations, eliminating the need to travel far to take exams.

Cost Effectiveness

The cost of education can include accommodation, travel, and meals, making it quite high. An important advantage of online education is that it tends to be more cost-effective than traditional on-campus courses. Furthermore, online classes generally have lower tuition fees, and students do not need to spend money on travel and sustenance to attend classes. There is significant potential for students to save money on textbooks, as most digital OER resources are freely available.

Wider Access

Online classes provide access to a wider range of programmes and courses because of their ability to reach more students without the high costs associated with face-to-face campus education. This is the reason why many campus-based universities and institutions are now offering some online courses alongside physical courses. At the OUT, a wide range of courses at certificate, diploma, bachelor, master and doctorate levels are offered in various fields including social sciences and humanities, business management, education, law, science and technology. This allows students to choose a programme that matches their career aspirations.

Learning at Own Pace

Another advantage of online education is the ability to learn at your own pace. Every student has their own learning speed, and this is where the benefits of distance learning truly come into play. Online classes allow you to set your own pace, review material as needed, and progress through the coursework in a way that suits your learning style. Learning at your own pace gives you complete control over your

learning process, making it one of the biggest benefits of online classes. Online learning offers the advantage that it can be said that “learning is not a function of time.”

Balancing Work and Education

One of the main advantages of online learning for working adults is the flexibility it provides in balancing work and education. If one works full-time during the day, one can still attend online classes in the evening. Even though this demands some sacrifices, this will not be at the expense of one’s work, studies, or family – and that’s what truly matters.

Learning and Earning

Online learning enables working professionals to stay employed while gaining an education, which is why it’s such a revolutionary development. Advancing one’s career no longer requires taking a career break, spending all the savings, or taking out a loan to afford not working while earning a degree.

Career Advancement

One of the main advantages of online classes is that online education allows one to progress in his/her current career while studying. If this involves specialisation or acquiring new skills, studying online offers a wider variety of courses to choose from.

Learn Anytime, Anywhere

With online studies, working professionals can attend classes at any time and from any location. Studying online is also an excellent choice for jobs that involve constant travelling for business trips. Then studying online is an excellent choice.

Disadvantages Of Online Education

Although online education seems to have many advantages, it nonetheless has some disadvantages, as follows:

Lack of Face-to-Face Interaction

One of the main disadvantages of online education is the lack of physical interaction, which can make it harder for you to communicate with fellow students and tutors. This can make it more difficult to build a sense of community, which is an important factor in helping you get the most out of your studies. To address this challenge, some online universities offer a strong online community to support you throughout your studies. Most young people form relationships with peers of the opposite gender while on university campuses. We now see a clear trend of young people preferring to study on campus rather than at home so they can socialise.

Hard to Stay Motivated

Another drawback of online education is the difficulty in maintaining focus when it based on self-study. Online learning is often undertaken independently, which can make it harder to stay engaged, navigate the process, and remain motivated. Before opting for online study, one must assess the ability to follow a plan, stay consistent, and work hard towards set goals.

Limited Access to Resources

When weighing the advantages and disadvantages of online learning, it's important to remember that online education sometimes provides limited access to resources and support compared to traditional on-campus courses. This is why, when selecting an online university, it is crucial to choose one that offers direct access to all the resources and support one might need.

Technical Difficulties

Studying online is dependent on internet access. Technical issues such as connectivity problems, software compatibility, or laptop malfunctions can hinder one's ability to attend classes. However, one possible solution is that students can download pre-recorded tutorials and study materials to any device, even when offline. It requires some planning beforehand, but it is a way to prevent technical problems from disrupting one's studies.

Isolation

Another possible disadvantage to consider is that online education can lead to feelings of isolation, as students are not physically present in a classroom and may not have the same opportunities to interact with other students and form social connections. It is important to keep this in mind and *prepare for it accordingly*, but as the pandemic has taught us, there are other ways to stay connected with others.

Framework

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has published (Mishra, 2023) a framework for measuring openness, which is based on the following ten dimensions:

- i) Entry requirements
- ii) Study location
- iii) Time of learning
- iv) Curricular flexibility
- v) Pedagogical approach
- vi) Technology use and
- vii) Learning resources
- viii) Assessment approach
- ix) Recognition of credentials
- x) Cost of education

Each dimension is measured on a 1 to 10 scale with reference to openness. The measurement is made by using the framework shown below in Table 2, by putting a cross in the respective box and then adding up the scores of all ten dimensions. Thereafter, the openness is determined qualitatively using the scale below:

Above 80: High Openness

60 – 79: Very Good Openness

40 – 59: Moderate Openness

20 – 29: Slight Openness

10 – 19: Low Openness

Table 2: Ten Dimensions for Openness Measurement

	1	2	3	4	5	Criteria	6	7	8	9	10	
Exclusive Entry						Entry						Anyone can join
Only from one location						Space						Anywhere
Specific Schedule						Time						Anytime
Fixed courses						Subject of Study						A la carte
Sage on the stage						Pedagogy						Highly collaborative
Proprietary tools; less options						Technology						Open tools; More options
Copyrighted						Learning Resources						Openly licensed
Institutional paced; fixed						Assessment						Learner-paced; Multiple pathways
Less recognition						Credentials						Recognised Everywhere
High						Cost						Zero, Low

Source: Author

The following recommendations are made in order to attain a high degree of openness:

- Adopt a flexible entry policy for anyone interested in pursuing a course.
- Create a new revenue model for sustainable higher education.
- Offer programs in multimodal pathways to enable learners to study from any location without being fixed to one system. A

course may be offered in-person, online, or in blended mode to help the learner choose the most suitable option

- Reduce the need for synchronous meetings (either physical or online) to the minimum necessary to meet the learning outcomes.
- Provide a variety of courses to choose from, and help the learners design their curriculum.
- Invest in and use open technology tools
- Embrace the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) and open textbooks by adopting a policy for OER and curating relevant open textbooks.
- Adopt a more flexible approach to assessment, providing how and when the learner may provide evidence of learning.
- Offer courses in a modular and stackable manner to accumulate credentials within a lifelong learning framework.

Success Rates in Open Education

Most distance learning students do not complete their studies and drop out for various reasons. In Pakistan, a study by Jamil & Igbal (2020) revealed that the average completion rate of distance learners after 10 years of studying for a bachelor's degree was 40%. At IGNOU, the pass rate for most bachelor's degrees is around 5% over three years (Reddy, 2002).

A recent analysis of enrolment and graduation statistics at the Open University of Tanzania revealed that the success rates were high in diploma and certificate programmes and very low in postgraduate programmes. Table 3 shows the success rates at OUT. Incidentally, female students had a higher success rate than their male counterparts at all levels of study. For a bachelor's degree, the success rate for those graduating between 1999 and 2019 was 27.4% on average, with males scoring 24.0% and females scoring 35.3%.

Table 3: Success Rate at the Open University of Tanzania

Non-Degree	Male	Female	Total
Admitted	40564	25796	66360
Graduated	11545	9209	20754
Success Rate	28.5	35.7	31.3
Bachelor's Degree	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Admitted	54956	24287	79243
Graduated	13169	8572	21741
Success Rate	24.0	35.3	27.4
Postgraduate	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Admitted	31815	11949	43764
Graduated	4803	2532	7335
Success Rate	15.1	21.2	16.8

Source: Author

Several factors influence the success of learners in open universities. Some are listed below:

1. *Quality of Instruction:* Well-designed courses with clear learning objectives and engaging instructional materials can enhance student success.
2. *Support Services:* Adequate support services such as tutoring, technical support, and academic advising can help students overcome challenges and stay on track.

3. *Flexibility*: The flexibility of online learning can benefit students with other commitments, such as work or family responsibilities.
4. *Technology*: Reliable technology infrastructure and user-friendly learning platforms are essential for a positive learning experience.
5. *Motivation and Discipline*: Self-motivated and disciplined students tend to perform better in online courses as they require strong time management skills and the ability to stay organised.
6. *Peer Interaction*: Opportunities for peer interaction and collaboration, such as discussion forums or group projects, can enhance the learning experience in online education.

The Future of Online Education

Following the disruption in education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the world of education will never be the same. The pandemic helped the public accept online education. Since then, most institutions that began offering online courses have continued to do so, even after the pandemic. With increasing internet speeds and bandwidth, learning will soon shift to online platforms, and more campuses may close. Professors might prefer to deliver lectures through video conferencing applications as more students leave campuses. Further research is necessary to ensure proper quality assurance of online education, particularly online assessment of remote learners. The existence of Artificial Intelligence programmes capable of writing essays for students serves as a wake-up call for professors to develop alternative assessment methods.

Ugur et al (2024) have argued that technologies such as artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, and blockchain are driving forces that open education systems must adapt.

Online education proves to be the best option for learners who want to study at a university outside their country. They can study without needing to travel abroad or apply for a visa, unless they wish to attend the graduation ceremony in person. International students are increasingly attracted to online education abroad due to travel

restrictions for some nationalities and the high costs of visas and study permits.

However, online education has its own challenges. The first is poor Access to the Internet and electricity in most African rural areas. In terms of the internet, Africa is still the dark continent. The high cost of Bandwidth in most African countries compared to other continents, especially Asian countries, is another challenge. The unemployability of graduates, due to programmes that do not promote skills development, remains a challenge, as most open universities lack technical subjects that require workshops and laboratories.

Due to the increasing number of workers seeking postgraduate qualifications at open universities, they now face insufficient supervision. There is a high number of students with few dedicated academic staff (poor staff-to-student ratios). This adversely impacts the success rate of postgraduate students.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, the following conclusions can be made: Africa south of the Sahara has a very low tertiary enrolment rate of 9% compared to the global average of 23%. It is through online and open education that gross enrolment can be raised to significant levels. The high cost of the internet and digital devices continues to hinder the expansion of online learning in Sub-Saharan Africa. Governments are expected to subsidise the costs of internet in open online universities within their countries to make this mode of digital delivery affordable for learners.

Given the goal to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 as part of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, it is the duty of governments and educational institutions to implement practices that support this aim. Openness offers a strong framework to rethink education and training in higher education. By adopting the ten dimensions of openness, virtual universities and other higher education institutions can develop resilient and future-proof systems that exemplify sustainable academic and management practices. This is because openness encourages fairness, flexibility, and freedom.

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